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ABSTRACT

School-reform efforts in recent years have stressed, and expanded, the leadership role of the principal. But in the view of many analysts, the task of transforming a school is too complex for one person to accomplish alone. Consequently, a new model of leadership is developing: distributed leadership. This Research Roundup summarizes five documents that discuss different facets of the distributed leadership model. (1) "Investigating School Leadership Practice: A Distributed Perspective" (James P. Spillane, Richard Halverson, and John B. Diamond) provides a coherent theoretical foundation for a distributed view of leadership. (2) "Building a New Structure for School Leadership" (Richard F. Elmore) links distributed leadership to the school's fundamental task of helping students learn. (3) "Co-Principals: A Double Dose of Leadership" (Michael Chirichello) explains how one district has successfully established co-principalships in its elementary schools. (4) "The Bridgeport Story: What Urban School Districts Need to Know About School Leadership Teams" (The Education Alliance) shares a framework and some practical tools for formalizing distributed leadership. (5) "The Bay Area School Reform Collaborative: Building the Capacity to Lead" (Michael Aaron Copland) describes how one school-reform network has succeeded in creating a broader base of leadership in its schools. (WFA)

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Distributed Leadership.

Larry Lashway

2003

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Research roundup
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS
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Distributed Leadership

Larry Lashway

Every principal, in moments of extreme stress, has thought, "This job is impossible!" Increasingly, researchers and policymakers are voicing the same sentiment. The expectations have always been formidable, but 20 years of school reform have stuffed the principal's job jar to overflowing with new chores and have undermined comfortable old assumptions about the nature of school leadership.

In response, some analysts have concluded that the common ideal of a heroic leader is obsolete. In their view, the task of transforming schools is too complex to expect one person to accomplish single-handedly. Accordingly, they believe leadership should be distributed throughout the school rather than vested in one position.

Beyond this core belief, however, advocates of distributed leadership offer divergent models. In some recent discussions, the term simply means giving other staff members some of the principal's current responsibilities. For example, a principal might hand off managerial tasks to the assistant principal; a large school could assign several "sub-principals" to different grade levels; or administrators could rotate extracurricular assignments.

Other versions of distributed leadership go beyond simply reshuffling assignments and call for a fundamental shift in organizational thinking that redefines leadership as the responsibility of everyone in the school. In this view, the principal retains a key role, not as the "chief doer" but as the architect of organizational leadership.

Because the concept is new and lacks a widely accepted definition, the research base for distributed leadership is embryonic. While there is considerable theory about distributed leadership, we have relatively little empirical knowledge about how, or to what extent, principals actually use it. And evidence that firmly links distributed leadership to student achievement is still far in the future.

Nonetheless, at a time when many policymakers and practitioners agree that the principalship needs fundamental rethinking, distributed leadership offers a coherent vision of one possible future. This review examines several facets of the distributed leadership model.

Larry Lashway is a research analyst and writer for the ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management at the University of Oregon.

James Spillane and colleagues provide a coherent theoretical foundation for a distributed view of leadership.

Richard Elmore links distributed leadership to the school's fundamental task of helping students learn.

Michael Chirichello explains how one district has successfully established co-principalships in its elementary schools.

The Education Alliance shares a framework and some practical tools for formalizing distributed leadership.

Michael Aaron Copland describes how one school reform network has succeeded in creating a broader base of leadership in its schools.

Spillane, James P.; Richard Halverson; and John B. Diamond. **"Investigating School Leadership Practice: A Distributed Perspective."** *Educational Researcher* 30:3 (April 2001): 23-28. EJ 624 230. Available online at **http://aera.net/pubs/er/pdf/vol30_03/AERA300306.pdf**

While distributed leadership has roots in earlier concepts such as "shared decision-making," current definitions are more far-reaching. James Spillane and colleagues provide a concise conceptual framework that incorporates leadership, instructional

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improvement, and organizational change. While theoretical in nature, the article is based on the authors' ongoing research with 13 elementary schools in Chicago.

The authors see distributed learning as an example of "distributed cognition," which views learning as a social rather than an individual activity. For example, a child solving a math problem may collaborate with parents, peers, or teachers, and may use tools such as calculators.

In the same way, school leadership encompasses a wealth of social interactions and shared tools. For instance, principals today are expected to exercise leadership by using data analysis as a tool for instructional improvement. However, this is a complex task requiring technical knowledge of testing, in-depth understanding of academic goals, motivational skill, and the ability to tease out implications for classroom practice. Even the best-qualified principal is unlikely to have mastery of all those areas; instead, effective principals elicit leadership from those who have the appropriate expertise.

The authors conclude that effective principals do not just string together a series of individual actions, but systematically distribute leadership by building it into the fabric of school life. Leadership is distributed not by delegating it or giving it away, but by weaving together people, materials, and organizational structures in a common cause.

Elmore, Richard F. **Building a New Structure for School Leadership.** Washington, D.C.: The Albert Shanker Institute, 2000. 40 pages. EJ 602 758. Available online at **http://www.shankerinstitute.org/education.html**.

The call for distributed leadership is often a response to principals' rapidly escalating responsibilities. However, as Richard Elmore makes clear in this monograph, distributed leadership also plays a role in generating reform and instructional improvement.

Elmore argues that the "technical core" of education—principals' day-to-day instructional decision-making—has typically been detached from organizational policymaking. Administrators have often defined their roles as protecting teacher autonomy and providing a buffer from outside interference, rather than trying to directly control what happens in the classroom. But standards-based reform has challenged this structure by making instructional improvement the measure of leadership success.

However, unlike such traditional management functions as budgeting and scheduling, instructional processes have to be *guided* rather than *controlled*. No matter how deep a principal's understanding of instruction, only classroom teachers have the day-to-day knowledge of specific students in specific classroom settings. Since essential knowledge is distributed across many individuals, it makes sense for leadership to be distributed as well.

Elmore cites the "principle of comparative advantage," which says that people should lead where they have expertise. But if everyone is a leader, what's to keep a school from fragmenting into conflicting and ungovernable camps? The key is that all of this leadership must be organized around a common task and shared common values. Creating this unity, not micromanaging instruction, is the principal's core responsibility.

Chirichello, Michael. **"Co-Principals: A Double Dose of Leadership."** *Principal* 82:4 (March/April 2003): 40-43. Available online at **www.naesp.org** (Members Only). Entire issue available from National Principals Resource Center, 1615 Duke St., Alexandria, VA 22314-3483. 800-386-2377, fax 800-396-2377. $8.

One of the biggest barriers to distributed leadership is the entrenched notion that there has to be a single leader. With multiple leaders, how will disagreements be resolved? Who will make the final decision? Who is accountable?

Although role ambiguity is often a barrier to shared leadership, a few schools have found ways to effectively share the principalship. This article describes a small district's experience with "co-principalships."

The author focused on the district's two elementary schools, each headed by two co-principals who are equally involved in staff development, curriculum coordination, teacher evaluation, and communication with parents.

By all accounts, the arrangement is working well. Teachers reported a greater "principal presence" and accessibility, and felt well-supported. The superintendent reported receiving fewer phone calls from parents because they now find it easier to reach someone at the school level with the authority to make immediate decisions. The co-principals also reported having more time to focus on instructional issues, and noted that this method of distributed leadership also reduced the usual "lonely-at-the-top" feelings traditionally experienced by principals.

On the other hand, the co-principals cited a real challenge in finding time to meet regularly in order to

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make sure they were in agreement on schoolwide issues. They also stressed the importance of pairing two individuals who shared core values and leadership styles, and were not ego-driven.

Although the article is too brief to thoroughly evaluate the promise and pitfalls of the co-principalship, it does demonstrate that sharing leadership at the top may be a viable solution for some districts.

The Education Alliance. **The Bridgeport Story: What Urban School Districts Need to Know About School Leadership Teams.** Providence, R. I.: The Education Alliance, June 2002. 45 pages. Available online at **http://www.alliance.brown.edu**.

Distributed leadership can be as simple as one principal encouraging the faculty to take on leadership responsibilities, or as complex as an entire district inaugurating new governance structures for multiple schools. This report from the Education Alliance, a school reform network headquartered at Brown University, describes an example of the latter approach.

With the assistance of The Education Alliance, the Bridgeport, Connecticut, school system instituted formal school leadership teams, each consisting of a principal, five teachers, and five parents, at a dozen schools. The teams were asked to develop school improvement plans based on school performance data.

The report documenting their results is largely descriptive. While it characterizes the project as successful, it appears to be an assessment of the team process rather than an evaluation of reform outcomes. Since the project was initiated in 2001-02, it is too early to measure the impact on student achievement. A brief discussion of "lessons learned" includes the importance of district support, adequate funding, focused professional development, and having an external partner to provide advice.

The most valuable part of the report for principals may be the appendices, which provide examples of tools used by the Bridgeport schools. These include team bylaws, a principal's task checklist, a leadership team checklist, and a team self-assessment instrument. The bylaws provide clarity on potentially divisive issues (for example, Bridgeport's bylaws preclude teams from discussing individual teacher evaluations), while the checklists give principals and teams a step-by-step listing of essential tasks. The self-assessment instrument encourages participants to reflect on their knowledge, skills, and personal attributes that contribute to team effectiveness.

Copland, Michael Aaron. **"The Bay Area School Reform Collaborative: Building the Capacity to Lead."** In *Leadership Lessons from Comprehensive School Reforms*, edited by Joseph Murphy and Amanda Datnow: 159-183. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Corwin Press, 2003. 304 pages. Paperback $34.95; Hardcover $74.95. *Available from:* Corwin Press, Customer Care, 2455 Teller Road, Thousand Oaks, CA 91320. 800-818-7243; fax 805-375-1700; e-mail order@corwinpress.com

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While the idea of distributed leadership is appealing, the lack of empirical evidence makes many school leaders cautious about plunging in. In this chapter from a book on comprehensive school reform, Michael Aaron Copland provides some preliminary findings from the work of the Bay Area School Reform Collaborative (BASRC).

BASRC consists of 86 schools engaged in data-driven, whole-school reform with a strong commitment to participatory leadership. Faculty members in each school collectively propose a problem statement, identify measurable goals, take action, analyze the resulting data, and repeat the cycle.

Copland surveyed all of the principals and a sampling of teachers in the BASRC schools. He found extensive staff involvement and a variety of leadership structures, including co-principalships, partnerships between principals and reform coordinators, and rotating lead teachers. Whatever the structure, however, formal leaders played a crucial role in encouraging and modeling nontraditional forms of leadership.

Another key finding was that the collective inquiry cycle was instrumental in establishing a new organizational structure that required involvement at all levels, thus creating a learning community. Essential leadership functions, such as vision, planning, and accountability became centered in the collective inquiry process, not in the actions of one leader.

Even amid this "decentered" leadership, principals played a strong role in hiring the right people, buffering the school from conflicting district demands, and modeling inquiry by habitually asking questions rather than drawing conclusions. In at least a few schools, the principal was still seen as the "person in charge."

On the most important question—the impact on student achievement—Copland notes that data are still too limited to make a firm link, but he characterizes early returns as "promising."

While Copland's portrait of distributed leadership is encouraging, the Bay Area network has some unique features that may limit the applicability of its experience, including a rigorous pre-acceptance process for the schools and a multimillion-dollar Annenberg Challenge grant that allows each school to hire a reform coordinator. □

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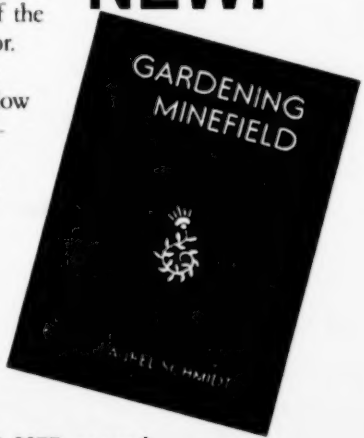

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